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A Book of Conquest: The Chachnama and Muslim Origins in South Asia

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Manan Ahmed Asif, **A Book of Conquest. The Chachnama and Muslim Origins in South Asia**, Cambridge, Mass.–London: Harvard University Press, 2016, xi+250pp., £??? (cloth), ISBN 9780674660113.

The *Chachnama*, or *Fathnama-yi Sind*, as the text is originally titled, is a 13th-century text written in Persian by a certain ‘Ali Kufi, about whom little is known. ‘Ali Kufi claims to have translated the book from an Arabic manuscript that had been preserved in the family of Muhammad ibn Qasim, the main hero of the text, until his times.

The book consists of two parts, the first presenting the history of the Brahmin dynasty that ruled parts of Sind before the conquest and the second narrating the campaigns in Sind of various Arab military leaders, culminating in the conquest of the area by Muhammad ibn Qasim.

This bipartite book has usually been discussed as a conquest book translated by ‘Ali Kufi in the 13th century from an Arabic original dating back to the 8th century. In his book on *Chachnama* Manan Ahmed Asif sets out to contextualise this enigmatic book and analyse it as an original 13th-century book on the theory of governance.

Asif's book has to be read against the backdrop of the conquest legend that lives on in Pakistan and out-dated 19th-century and early 20th-century scholarship, which ignored the 13th-century context of the translation and offered naive readings of the purported eight-century conquest text, taken as factual history.

The merit of Asif's book is to draw attention to *Chachnama* and its context. The emphasis on the binary structure of the book, containing not only the translation of an earlier Arabic text, but also a separate story about the pre-conquest Brahmin history, is welcome. Asif also points out the central importance of the conquest legend in modern attempts at defining Indian/Pakistani Muslim identity.

The book suffers, however, from a cavalier attitude towards the text. On p. 20, the author sums up his idea of earlier research on *Chachnama*: "It is misread as a translation of an earlier Arabic text; in fact it is an original Persian text from the early thirteenth century. It is mischaracterized as a conquest narrative; in reality it is a work of political theory. It is misplaced as a source of Muslim origins; indeed it represents a politically heterogeneous world of the thirteenth-century Sind." Unfortunately, all the three main points of the book are flawed.

Asif dedicates a few pages (pp. 55–62) to the question of translation, but his discussion remains superficial. While it is certainly true that in Persian historical texts claims are occasionally made for an Arab descent for prestige (p. 60), there is plenty of internal evidence in *Chachnama* to show that the second part of the book does derive from an early Arabic source: the information it contains may not be factual, but it tallies with early Arabic sources, and ‘Ali Kufi could not have found this information in works other than Arabic texts discussing the conquest of Sind. Asif, p. 34, writes: "Since no historian of the period—notably neither Tabari nor Ya‘qubi—offer greater detail on the account provided by Baladhuri, I can conjecture that his text is the chief source on the campaigns in Sind for *Chachnama*." The point is manifestly wrong. *Chachnama* contains a lot of rare material, e.g., early Arabic verses, that is missing in Baladhuri, so that there is no way of explaining how ‘Ali Kufi came by them, if we do not postulate as his source an early Arabic text other than Baladhuri, such

as one of the lost works of al-Mada'ini, who is frequently quoted as an authority in *Chachnama*. Moreover, it is unacceptable to claim that a certain text is the source of another merely because of its length!

Referring to the lack of full *isnads* and general attribution of material to vague sources ("the wise of Sind say", "some of the Brahmins of Aror report") Asif, p. 63, concludes that "[t]his practice does not follow literary conventions of Arabic historiography, where specific names are always used," and further, pp. 63–64, "that 'Ali Kufi relied on a series of texts to compose an original work (...) couching his own work in the prestige economy of Arab descent." This is based on two mistakes. First, the use of specific *isnads* is rare when quoting information derived from non-Muslims, especially when concerning earlier nations. Secondly, full *isnads* are often dropped by Arab historians (e.g., al-Dinawari) and even more often by their Persian translators (e.g., Bal'ami). It is also difficult to imagine how 'Ali Kufi could have found numerous early Arabic works on the conquest in Uch. Obviously, he may have used some secondary sources in addition to his main source, as many other translators (e.g., Bal'ami) did, too.

There is also a remarkable change in style from p. 72 of the edition onward, pointing to separate origins of the story of Chach and his family and the latter conquest narrative. The second part does exhibit features of 13th-century style, but this is only to be expected, as translators of historical texts did not aim at accuracy and stylistic faithfulness but at pleasing contemporary audience.

Asif does not study the text in relation to extant Arabic sources, even though there is a huge amount of material (personal names, verses, stories themselves, etc.) in *Chachnama* that could have been used to do this. It is highly desirable that this material be analysed in order to contextualise the Arabic original.

That the second part of *Chachnama* does hark back to an Arabic source does not mean that it would be its faithful translation (translations of historical works rarely were so) nor that the story about the manuscript the translator found is true – it is a topos, although ancient manuscripts were sometimes really found – or that this were to be dated to the eighth century. What it tells is merely that the second part goes back to an earlier Arabic text that was well informed of the events of the conquest, not necessarily as they really were, but as they were imagined to have been.

Secondly, it is odd to claim that a book titled *Fathnama-yi Sind*, which repeatedly claims to discuss the conquest of Sind, and which, indeed, discusses the conquest could be "mischaracterized as a conquest narrative." Other topics are also discussed in the book and it is, of course, a product of the thirteenth century in its translated form, but this does not mean that it would be a mischaracterisation to call a conquest narrative a conquest narrative. Without doubt the main topic of the second part of the book is the conquest of Sind.

Thirdly, it would indeed be interesting to study the thirteenth-century context of the book, but the reader is disappointed by how little there actually is about this in Asif's book. One might have expected a detailed discussion of the motives for composing the book, its immediate reception, its place in thirteenth-century historiography, etc.

Instead, Asif discusses at length the book as a treatise of political theory (especially pp. 78–127). It is true that there is this aspect, too, but not in exclusion to other aspects, such as being

a conquest narrative. Asif nicely highlights the passages that can be read as comments on just government, as did, e.g., Peter Hardy in 1981. Still, such passages hardly justify classifying the book as a book on political theory. The "political" passages are, in the end, few and far between, and there is no unified theory behind the individual stories – obviously, one can build such a theory based on these passages, but the theory itself is not there in the book.

Despite Asif's effort to show otherwise, the second part of *Chachnama* is still best considered as a translation of a conquest story going back to an early, possibly ninth-century Arabic text, whether by al-Mada'ini or not, and containing occasional pieces of political advice. Inevitably, the decision to translate it (and, perhaps, to attach the first part to it) was taken in the thirteenth century and this late context is equally interesting and should be studied more carefully in a later monograph.

The enigmatic first part would also merit a proper study of its own, but Asif has little to say about it and merely resumes it, picking up some bits as examples of what he sees as the book's political theory.

There are several minor inaccuracies and the first chapter is largely based on completely outdated sources, ignoring almost all modern scholarship. Asif is also too fond of strawman arguments, such as presenting modern scholarship continuing "to insist on 'Muslim pasts' and 'Hindu pasts' as hermetically sealed categories" (p. 180). How many serious scholars in the field would accept the claim that they believe in hermetically sealed Muslim and Hindu pasts!?

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